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FM AMEMBASSY ASMARA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9208
INFO RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1482
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1658
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEPADJ/CJTFF-HOA J2X CAMP LEMONIER DJ
RUMICEA/JICCENT MACDILL AFB FL
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 ASMARA 000850

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LONDON, PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHERS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/25/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [ER](#)

SUBJECT: ASMARA ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT: MORE DETAILS EMERGE

REF: A. A) 00821 ASMARA

[1](#)B. B) 00838 ASMARA

Classified By: CDA Jennifer A. McIntyre, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (S) Summary: As the investigation into the shooting of National Security Agency Deputy Colonel Simon Ghebredenghil continues, an Eritrean businessman believed to be involved in the assassination attempt was shot and killed by Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) officials near the Ethiopian border. The GSE allegedly has arrested over 500 individuals in connection with the shooting, which may include the arrest of General Gerezgheri "Wuchu" Andemariam on October 24. The emerging details surrounding the assassination attempt are shining a bright light on the extent of corruption within the senior ranks of the military and showing the cracks in the outwardly unified faade of the President Isaias' government. Post will continue to monitor fallout from this incident and its possible implications for the GSE's inner circle and military preparedness in the face of possible conflict on the Eritrean-Ethiopian border. End Summary.

IMPLICATED BUSINESSMAN SAMSON KILLED BY THE GSE

[1](#)2. (S/NF) Following the October 13 assassination attempt on Colonel Simon Ghebrendenghil, wealthy Eritrean businessman Samson (LNU), who had been implicated in the attempt, fled Asmara. Accompanied by the personal driver of General Gerezgheri "Wuchu" Andemariam and a military guard under General Wuchu's command, Samson traveled overland in a military Landcruiser stocked with a cache of arms. The group took refuge in an Eritrean Orthodox Church monastery near Adi Quala (to which Samson previously had made donations) waiting for the right time to flee across the Ethiopian border. GSE officials tracked Samson to the monastery. A firefight ensued and Samson was killed. The driver and guard were taken into custody and returned to Asmara. In a separate conversation with Emboff, XXXXXXXXXXXX confirmed Samson's death, the existence of the weapons cache and the presence of General Wuchu's driver and guard at the shootout between Samson and the GSE officials.

[1](#)3. (S) Samson, who was also know as the "civilian general", had a long-time business relationship with General Wuchu and others in the Eritrean military. In his late 30's, he ran a hardware and import/export business reported to have made millions by means of government contracts arranged by high-ranking military officials, and illegal foreign currency transactions and import/export exchanges over the past ten years. A partial owner of the Midian Hotel, Samson reportedly used the hotel as a means to launder money for military and government officials.

GENERAL WUCHU ARRESTED?

[1](#)4. (S/NF) Rumors abound as to the status of General Wuchu. The reports have varied from claiming his departure from the country to his death. One Eritrean contact told Poloff he saw General Wuchu driving through Asmara on Monday, October [1](#)22. The resident Reuters stringer shared with Poloff that in the late afternoon on Wednesday, October 24 one of his sources informed him of General Wuchu's arrest. XXXXXXXXXXXX told to Poloff on Friday, October 26 that the GSE had arrested General Wuchu earlier in the week. (Comment: Post has been unable to confirm this report. Local observers also claim that over 500 individuals have been arrested so far and anticipate that more arrests are on the horizon. These interlocutors also believe no government or military officials are immune from indictment. End Comment.)

BUSINESSMAN FIKRE'S DEATH AND HIS FUNERAL

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[1](#)5. (S) Reading like a John Grisham novel, more details of the circumstances leading to Fikremariam "Fikre" Andemariam's death are coming to light. (Fikre's death allegedly was the lead up to the assassination attempt.) According to a well-connected Eritrean, the saga began several months ago when Samson and three other businessman approached General Wuchu to contest the awarding of a tender to Fikre's company for installation of water pipes in the city of Asmara. Despite the protests and GSE investigation, Fikre retained the contract. (Note: Fikre's company had also received all of the supply contracts for the construction of the Sawa Military Camp in western Eritrea for the past 10 years. End note.)

Tensions arose given the fierce competition among the few Eritrean businessmen who receive government contracts) contracts that are primarily awarded to friends of high-ranking government officials (namely the military) who then skim a portion of the profits for themselves. Fikre reportedly began to fear for his life and asked for protection from XXXXXXXXXXXX.

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Fikre returned to Asmara the week of October 1, at which point, the GSE detained him in Police Station #2, with at least two of his brothers. (Note: The brothers were released after a few days. In addition, employees of Fikre's supply company have been in detention in Police Station #2 since the middle of August. End Note.)

¶6. (S) Fikre reportedly died in jail on October 8. The family requested an autopsy be completed prior to his burial, protesting that Fikre had been young and healthy when entering the jail only a few days earlier. An Eritrean contact told Poloff that only President Isaias, Colonel Ghebredenghil and XXXXXXXXXXXX received copies of the autopsy report. Despite never having done his mandatory national service, Fikre received a hero's burial and was laid to rest in Asmara's Martyr's Cemetery on October 12. The funeral became a city-wide event. One witness commented that attendance at Fikre's funeral exceeded that of the two biggest funerals since the country's 1993 referendum - the former Foreign Minister's funeral in 2005 and the funeral of one of the founders of the struggle in 2000. He observed that the turnout essentially represented a silent demonstration by the people, as they are unable to protest in other ways.

THE GSE'S OFFICIAL SPIN

¶7. (U) The Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) announced Tuesday, October 23 that "perpetrators" of the assassination attempt on Colonel Simon Ghebredenghil were in GSE custody, although the announcement did not include the names of those arrested. In an interview with Reuters, Acting Minister of Information Ali Abdu stated "the government had full control of the situation" but refused to comment on the details of the detentions. According to the Acting Minister, the investigation is ongoing.

¶8. (U) Complementing the statements about the investigation, the GSE published an editorial about fighting corruption in the Arabic, Tigrinya and English government-controlled newspapers. Describing corruption as, "treason against our martyrs", and a vice that "pollutes and weakens any given society", the editorial likened fighting corruption to continuing the independence struggle and urged the people to join with the Government to fight against corruption. The editorial further insisted that "law enforcement bodies and the means for surveillance at their disposable should be strengthened and constantly updated", thus empowering the GSE to fight corruption by any means necessary.

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WHAT THE MAN ON THE STREET SAYS

¶9. (C) Residents of Asmara state they were aware of the shenanigans of their military officers and their corrupt business activities. For example, General Filipos Woldeyohannes (formerly head of the western Gash Barka region and now head of the Asmara region) is well-known as the "go-to" general to arrange an escape to Sudan. Many Eritreans regularly gossip about the homes which have been appropriated from civilians and public scrutiny. Many Eritrean observers believe that this incident will begin to crack the iron grip of President Isaias and his military officials over the government and the people of Eritrea. One high-ranking government official told Emboff, "Thank goodness. Now maybe things will change for the better."

COMMENT

¶10. (C) The assassination attempt on Colonel Ghebredenghil has created a real dilemma for the GSE by publicizing the existence of deep-rooted corruption within the military -- making it impossible for the GSE to hide or deny these charges. Within the higher levels of the GSE, there appear to be a split into two tiers: those who are still committed to the ideals of independence struggle and who will use any means to bankroll and continue the struggle, and those out to make as much money as possible for their own bank accounts. The question remains: can the first tier) the President and his immediate circle - effectively battle and contain the fallout from this incident or does this incident presage the beginning of the regime's fall from grace?

¶11. (S/NF) Post will continue to monitor the potential impacts on the military. Multiple sources indicate that the GSE leadership anticipates an outbreak of hostilities with Ethiopia in the near future. With General Wuchu possibly in prison, speculation from many observers that General Filipos is next, and reports that numerous colonels have fled or are in prison, the military leadership is clearly shaken and the impact on morale of the military is unknown at this point. Finally, if the GSE cracks down on the illegal financial operations of the military and its privileged businessmen, the GSE may end up limiting those resources available to the military for maintaining its large number of recruits and to prepare for conflict. End Comment.

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